

Prisons, Social Control and Political Prisoners

By Anti-Imperialist Political Prisoner/ Prisoner Of War

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Increasingly, the globalization of markets and profit-seeking has pressed U.S. prisons to become profit-generating enterprises - the prison-industrial complex.

Nevertheless, prisons continue to serve their main purpose as well: to warehouse and disappear the "unacceptable." Prisons exist to deprive their captives of their liberties, their human agency, and to punish. These institutions stigmatize prisoners through moralistic denunciations and indictments based on bad genes - skin color as a crime.

The law - a political institution in itself provides the framework for the war of social control against oppressed nations, working classes and non-compliant women.

The vast majority of prisoners are not imprisoned because they are "criminals," but because they've been accused of breaking one of an ever-increasing number of laws designed to exert tighter social control and State repression. They have been scapegoated and criminalized. This can be seen in the increased number of Black, Latino, Native American and Asian youth detained under youth-crime acts and "anti-gang" laws; the number of foreign nationals (excluding most Europeans) imprisoned under hate-mongering immigration laws; and of course, the "drug" war in which hundreds of thousands have been kidnapped from their communities, even from other countries. These sweeping laws embody and embolden U.S. capitalist policies to criminalize and decimate targeted populations and to sustain a hostage Third World and white working-class wage-labor force behind prison walls. Most prisoners, by virtue of their ethnicity and class, are victims of ethnic-cleansing policies - death deferred to incarceration.

There are other "undesirables" as well: those who have consciously, politically resisted, opposed - even attacked - the injustices and inequalities of this State system of social control. These prisoners are political prisoners, historically among the most feared and despised by those who wield State power. In the 1950's, COINTELPRO (the Federal COUNTER INTELLIGENCE PROgram) was created. It employed dirty-tricks, disinformation, militarized police agencies and assassination in its political war against the national liberation, anti-imperialist and anti capitalist forces. Imprisonment was also, and continues to be, one of its weapons against political activists.

The state shows little mercy to its political enemies. The case of Mumia Abu-Jamal is a current well-known example. He was denied even a modicum of a fair trial, under more "liberal" standards than exist in this period. Geronimo ji-Jaga (Pratt) and Leonard Peltier were both framed for murders by Federal and local COINTELPRO forces. Geronimo was freed after much struggle and 27 years. Leonard is still in prison. Assata Shakur was convicted of a police killing she could not have done and is only free in exile. More than a few political prisoners remain imprisoned for nearly two decades and some for nearly three decades - the Angola Three, the New York Three, Black Panthers and New Afrikan militants, Puerto Rican independentistas, North American anti-imperialist solidarity fighters, and other comrades. To be a political prisoner is neither a comfortable nor a privileged situation. To remain committed to one's beliefs and principles exacts a heavy price. Political prisoners in New York state prisons are rarely held in the same prison. Many have spent years, even a decade, in isolation control units for no other reason than their political association and "political crimes." Many have been denied health care for security reasons. Enemies of the state are deliberately targeted, subject to continual surveillance. The state is determined to destroy us. On purpose. Not merely because the prison system is a vehicle of equal-opportunity punishment and casual cruelty that is by its very nature crushing the life and breath from its victims and hostages.

To be a political prisoner is not a matter of standing higher in a "hierarchy" of prisoners. Where one stands is a matter of consciousness, not of social status or privilege. It is a placement based in political practice and international law. A U.S. court has even noted that "crimes" must be looked at differently when carried out in furtherance of a political struggle against a State. There are both pure political offenses (like sedition) and relative political offenses. These include "otherwise common crimes committed in connection with a political act, or common crimes committed for political motives or in a political context." The court goes on to say in relation to political status and international law:

It is the fact that the insurgents are seeking to change their governments that makes the political offense exception applicable, not the reasons for wishing to do so or the nature of the acts by which they hope to

accomplish that goal. As well there are some social prisoners sucked into the prison machine who have become conscious through the daily, punishing repression, brutality, racism, and injustice. These comrades, men like George Jackson, Ruchell Magee, Hugo Pinell and many others, stepped beyond their social offenses and kidnapping-victimization, beyond the individualism demanded by the prison system to challenge the system consciously, as self-determining protagonists. They became enemies of the state, subject to that specific jacket and treatment for political prisoners. Comrades such as these are murdered by the prison or languish in control unit prisons for decades as well.

Political prisoners come from their communities, become conscious. Part of that consciousness is understanding that we are from the community of oppressed and exploited. Many political prisoners were active in opposing the prison system long before we ever imagined that we would end up prisoners. Many continue to work against concentration camp USA once released. The injustice and inhumanity of the prison system are only logical extensions or conclusions of the overall inequalities of the entire system. We oppose cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity in the system and in our communities.

There will be more political prisoners as it becomes more imperative to resist the rapacious, human-eating system, as our social and political movements grow stronger and challenge more directly globalization, capitalism, and the increasingly militarized police state. After all, the State is more invested in social control than ever. (It was caught off guard in Seattle at the anti-WTO demonstrations but reacted in a predictable manner.) What will be the destination of the 60 people still being charged there in Seattle? What about the activist given a seven-year sentence in Oregon for throwing a rock in an anti-globalization demonstration last summer? Or Khalil Jacobs-Fantauzzi, the Puerto Rican comrade who was the only person to face trial after demonstrations against corporate seizure of KPFA radio in Berkeley last summer? Khalil is an anti-prison activist and played a leading organizing role in California in the campaign to free the Puerto Rican Prisoners of War and political prisoners. (He was acquitted after taking his case to trial).

Many social and political activists have escalated their work in support of prisoners and to challenge the brutal slave-labor prison establishment. This growth was reflected in the timely, qualitative conference of Critical Resistance in Fall 1998. The work of activists contributed to creating the conditions in which Amnesty International at last issued a report on human rights in the U.S., in the face of U.S. power and imperial pronouncements that it is the godfather of democracy and human rights. Prisoners in even the deepest of holes are feeling some hope despite the downward spiral of inhuman treatment and increasing demonization.

Yet in the midst of this rise of activism, there seems to be a reticence to support political prisoners and Prisoners of War, or a tendency to say that there are no differences in consciousness, or roles of prisoners - for example, "all prisoners are political prisoners" since imprisonment is a political policy. Some pamphlets about prison support work include "support for political prisoners and POWs" but little about who we are or why we should be supported as part of prison activism. Surely supporting political prisoners is not an impediment to the real work of opposing the prison establishment or fighting for more humane conditions. We, too, experience the full range of repression. We are here because we have challenged that social repression!

At times it seems the hesitance to support is precisely because of our politics, our political consciousness and actions. Perhaps the conscious, relative political "crimes" we have been charged with committing conflict with some people's own political strategies. But should we? a movement not encourage consciousness, and self-determining, creative and collective protagonists in the struggle for human dignity and rights?

There is always room to debate politics, points of view, strategies and tactics. To confront differences and questions is a good thing. Any struggle for liberation demands free and open debate of ideas and practice. At the same time, active struggles need to support those who act consciously, politically. To do so is a part of asserting the right to struggle as well as to defend activism and promote stronger resistance to the military, financial, and political apparatus that denies our society and the whole world true equality and justice.

Editors note: This article was written in late 1999, or early 2000 - so, obviously it is a bit out of date. None of those arrested during the '99 anti-WTO riots and protests received lengthy jail sentences, and some lawsuits surrounding acts of police brutality are still pending. While some of the thoughts expressed in this article are no longer valid, overall this article is still extremely relevant today.